INSIDER’S GUIDE TO COLLEGE ETIQUETTE
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Before we begin, put away your white gloves. College etiquette isn’t about teacups and soupspoons. It’s about the fact that no sensible person wants to go off to college and make a bad impression. It is therefore, in your self-interest to know the basic rules for getting along. Some are obvious—others, not so much. And ignorance is no excuse. So put down your cell phone, stop chewing your gum, sit back and read on.

Four Hard Truths

1. **Certain things are expected of you in college.** All institutions of higher education operate under a simple code that requires you to treat your instructors and fellow students as valued contributors to a worthwhile endeavor: namely, your education. It pays to cultivate an interest in them and be polite.

2. **Instructors judge you by your manners.** Your social graces (or lack thereof) get reflected in your grades, in the references professors write on your behalf, and even in the opportunities you’re given in college and beyond.

3. **Proper manners are a powerful but subtle force.** They give you an edge by making you seem even more likeable and impressive than you already are. They are also the basis of civilized society—not to mention a happy, peaceful, and rewarding college experience.

4. **Knowing exactly what behavior is expected of you will save you a lot of nail biting.** You may have grown up with more casual standards at home or in high school, and that can put you at a big disadvantage in college. You don’t want to worry about being so clueless that you accidentally offend your favorite professor, do you? We didn’t think so. That’s why we’re here to help.
Attitude

Having the right attitude is huge. Research shows that happy people tend to be more productive and considerate than crabby folks. So even if you’re taking a required class that seems boring and useless, try to remember why you’re in college in the first place. It helps to think in terms of goals: You want to set short-term benchmarks for the semester and longer-term life goals, too. In both cases, a positive attitude will go a long way toward getting you there.

Getting in Gear

**Preemptive Strike #1 | Err on the side of being too formal.**

Listen attentively. Raise your hand before speaking. Say thank you. Reply pleasantly to questions. Resist the impulse to get inventive. As Miss Manners points out, the opposite of “polite” is not “creative.” The opposite of “polite” is “rude.”

**Preemptive Strike #2 | Learn your instructors’ names.**

The most basic way to charm your teachers and express interest in their courses is to address them properly. Don’t call an older woman Miss or a man Mister. The same goes for You, Sister, or Brother. Never call your instructors by their first names or nicknames unless they specifically ask you to. (In some parts of the South, it’s OK to call a woman Ma’am, but it makes many female instructors cringe—especially ones from other parts of the country.) Stick with Professor ______, Dr. ______, or—if your instructor doesn’t have a doctorate—Mr. or Ms. ______.

**TIP**  
The Hidden Costs of Texting: What’s so wrong with checking your texts and e-mails during class once in a while? Good question, and here’s the answer: It can actually count against your grade. “Even if you’re a wonderful straight-A student, if I see you checking text messages, I’ll take points off your classroom participation score,” says Deborah Fuller, a professor at Rhode Island College. “It’s very disheartening from an instructor’s standpoint to see students using their phones in the classroom—and it’s not like we don’t notice you staring intently into your lap.” A better strategy is to stay engaged in class, safe in the knowledge that you can check your phone later.
Preemptive Strike #3 || Abandon your phone at the classroom door.

Or, at the very least, turn it off. And don’t just turn the ringer down. We repeat: Turn off the phone completely. You should not check texts during class. You should not ask to visit the restroom to check your texts. You should not play chess or Zelda Mobile Beta on your phone while your instructor is teaching. This sounds absurdly self-evident, but it is probably the number one etiquette problem out there right now.

Classroom Rules

1. **Show up.** Attendance is major. When you miss one day in college, it’s the same as missing a week of high school because everything is so much more concentrated. Not only that, but each class also represents more than an individual unit: It’s an essential building block, and you add to that foundation over the course of a semester. Also: If you miss a certain number of classes, you might have to drop the course.

2. **Show up on time.** Plan your commute and arrange your courses so that you can get to class right on schedule. If you miss the first 10-15 minutes of class, you’ll miss the basis of that day’s discussion. Ideally, you want to arrive a few minutes early, so you can calmly find a seat and take out your books and supplies.

3. **Come prepared.** If you’ve been assigned reading or homework, no matter how grueling, have it done in advance. For every hour you spend in class at college, expect to study two more hours outside of class. That means for every 3-credit course you’re taking, you’ll need to spend at least six hours of your own time each week on your assignment. Many classes involve feedback on your work and peer reviews. Some instructors ask for in-class essays on your outside reading. It’s easy to lose continuity and fall behind.

4. **Pay close attention to the syllabus.** No, it’s not junk mail. It’s a guide that spells out exactly what’s required of you if you’re going to succeed in the class. You’ll want to refer back to the syllabus often, so no crumpling it up in the bottom of your backpack.
5. **Expect to work.** You’re not entitled to a passing grade merely because you show up to class. To succeed, you need to participate in discussions, take notes, study, do well on tests, and complete all of your assignments. If you’re sinking, talk to your professor during office hours. There’s an incredible amount of help on college campuses: writing centers, math tutors, language labs for non-native English speakers, financial aid advisors, and guidance counselors, etc.

6. **Don’t surf the Web.** Taking notes on your laptop is fine. Checking your e-mail, updating your Facebook page, posting messages on Twitter, or participating electronically in any way with the rest of the planet is not. It distracts other students, and professors view it as the height of rudeness. You might as well hang a sign over your head saying, “I’m not listening.”

7. **Don’t try to monopolize the conversation.** You’re in class to learn something, right? So you don’t want to be all projection—put your antennae out. Find a balance between participation in the discussion and active listening. While you’re at it, be a great listener in study groups, too. We know you’re really interesting—there just isn’t a place in college for a class clown or someone who won’t shut up.

8. **Dress appropriately.** Your instructors don’t want to see your underwear. Aim for modest and presentable. Try this guideline: If it’s something you’d (a) put on to attend the MTV Video Music Awards or (b) use to clean your oven, don’t wear it to class.

9. **Remember that you are in control of your future.** Your instructors teach multiple classes, serve on committees, and are regularly called into department and division meetings. And, as impossible as it is to imagine, they also have lives off campus. They don’t have time to babysit you. You have to take responsibility for your schedule, your classwork, and your attitude. And, oh yeah, your grades.

**Playing Well with Others: The Group Project**

In the beginning, college students sat in class, listened to lectures and occasionally—while struggling not to fall asleep in the dark—watched an enlightening slide show. Nowadays, most college classes
involve doing hands-on projects in small groups; afterward, you present your work to your professor and the rest of your classmates for review. This involves a new kind of etiquette, also known as teamwork.

- **Treat the students in your group in a collegial manner.** It’s vital that you pull your weight, come to meetings on time, listen to what other people have to say, and plan everything together. It shouldn’t be a competitive thing. You’re all pulling toward the same goal, and part of your grade may be based on your teamwork skills.

- **Give constructive criticism.** If you’re required to offer a peer review of an essay, stay neutral and focused, and don’t get personal. Comments like, *I hate this paper, it’s really stupid, I can’t believe this happened to you,* or *Geez, you totally screwed up here* are the opposite of helpful and productive. In addition to causing people to despise you, words like these generate bad karma. Keep to specifics: What did you like best about the essay and why? Where would you like to know more information?

- **Prepare to learn from each other.** The fact that the people in your group have different backgrounds and talents—but are interested in the same subject—already makes for a creative group dynamic. Chances are, bouncing ideas off your classmates will make you smarter and broaden your worldview. You might even find your future business partner in the group or make a new friend.

### Communicating with Your Professor

Most instructors are passionate about their subjects and really love students. So go talk to them!

1. **Discover office hours.** Almost all instructors post days and times when they’re available to students—and if those hours don’t work for you, you can always ask to schedule an appointment. Office hours are one of the best learning tools you have in college. Come early—don’t wait until just before an exam or the due date for an essay. Come prepared to take notes, and come equipped: Bring a short list of the kinds of problems or concepts that are confusing you and why. If you need help with an essay, jot down some possible theses and an outline or two in advance. Give your instructor something to work with.
2. **Embrace your college e-mail account.** Your college e-mail account becomes active as soon as you enroll, and you should check it for updates constantly. Instructors send out tons of vital stuff through campus e-mail, from assignments to notifications about cancelled classes. Used properly (see tip box “How to Write to Your Professor,”), it can be a great way to communicate with your professor, too.

3. **Don’t have your mom or dad call.** Don’t expect your parents to fight your battles, especially not in college. In fact, instructors can’t legally talk to your parents unless you give written permission. Even then, it’s still weird.

4. **Don’t expect your instructor to call you back after work.** College faculty members are very careful not to call students back from home simply because they don’t want their private numbers floating around. Think about it: Who wants to get a call at 2 AM the night before the exam?

5. **If you have a personal crisis, head to the office for a face-to-face.** If you find yourself in extenuating circumstances—by which we mean an exceptional situation that is affecting your class work—it’s important that you talk to your instructor in private, not in the classroom with nineteen other people listening. Most teachers will work with you.

**Fatal Mistakes**

1. **Disappearing.** Surprise! It happens more often than you’d think: Students attend class for a couple of weeks and then vanish into thin air. The college disappearing act is so lethal because it can kill your financial aid. Most federal student loans will allow you to fail a class once, but if you fail it twice, you can lose your grant *permanently.* Meaning that, if you decide to take a break and come back to college a few years from now, you won’t be able to get financial aid. Most community college students are on Pell grants.

2. **Not staying in touch with your professors.** If you must be away, or you have an exam conflict, make arrangements with your instructor ahead of time. We repeat: You need to do this well in advance. “Oh, I missed the midterm because my boyfriend was having a hard time and I didn’t come to class for two weeks—can I take the test now?” Uh, no.
3. **Blatant rudeness.** Some behavior—chronic lateness, obvious texting, being abusive to other students in the course of a debate—is virtually apology-resistant. Don’t go there.

**The Right Way to Ask for a Reference**

- **Give your professor at least two weeks lead-time.** It takes thought and research to write a good reference, and your instructor might have to unearth your file from a few semesters back. Also, as we’ve mentioned, college faculty are busy people.
- **Provide a stamped envelope** (and make sure to use the correct postage).
- **Be thorough about what the application is for,** what they want to know about you, and where it needs to be sent.

**Have a Complaint?**

- **Talk to your instructor privately,** during office hours.
- **Speak in I-messages, not you-messages.** “You”—messages (i.e., “You never explained this stuff”) sound inherently hostile and tend to put people on the offensive.”I”—messages, on the other hand, simply state a problem (i.e., “I feel frustrated because we never touched on Loop Quantum Gravity in class, yet there was a question about it on the test”). Chances are your instructor will appreciate your cordial “I”—message and do you right. And if not, at least you won’t have permanently alienated him or her.
- **Resist the urge to vent about your professor on the Internet.** Online discussion groups and social websites are not the place to whine about your school, your instructor, or your fellow students. That’s what calling home is for.

**TIP**

Don’t think now is the right time for you to be in school? That’s fine, but you have to officially withdraw from your classes. If you don’t do the paperwork, your instructor has no choice but to give you an F. And you can’t disappear and then show up for final exam, either. Most instructors specify in the syllabus that if you cut too many classes, you can’t pass the course.
How to Write to Your Professor

Three words: In proper English. Do not e-mail your professor using texting slang or shorthand. Don’t even text your professor using texting slang or shorthand. It affects their attitude towards you—and not in a good way. Consider a few examples of actual student e-mails:

Cool:

Dear Professor Fuller,

This is David K. I am in your 11:30-12:45 Eng-091 Class. I was unable to attend class this morning due to a bad reaction I had to some food I ate last night. I was in the ER this morning. I was wondering if it is at all possible to know what the lesson was on today and I will work on it during the weekend. I know I will not get credit for it but I would like to work on it anyway.

Thank you,

David

Seriously Uncool:

hi is april are u gonna send us the homework so i can print it out and show u it

Hello Fuller,

I’m sorry to not com today I was just wondering if I can take the gammar test tomorrow in your moring class please. My mom Got Rush to the hospital. I promise I will not miss no more classes. I know this is my three time bt im trying to do good. So please can you get back to me asp. Nicki

Do how do I do the packet tht I give I know I got wirte a paragh and what else. Jen

Any questions?

What If Someone Disrespects You?

Good question. In this case, the Dean of students should be your first stop. Every college has one, and the Dean of students role is to create a supportive, safe atmosphere for everyone on campus. He or she
is also expected to promote the college’s moral code. It’s a terrific resource. Expect wise, impartial, Yoda-like guidance.

**Is It Ever Appropriate to Give your Professor a Gift?**
Yes—and it can mean a lot. Just wait until after the final grades have been posted, so there’s no question of impropriety. And don’t feel like you have to spend a lot. Instructors are thrilled to get homemade cookies, a handwritten note, or, occasionally, even a friendly hug. Feel free to spread the love.

**Being Gracious to Your Academic Advisor: A How-To**
The first time you walk into your academic advisor’s office, you will receive a full psychic reading. Then, despite the fact that she barely knows you, your advisor will be able choose exactly which classes you should take, point you toward your perfect career. OK, it doesn’t actually work like that. You can’t show up like a blank slate and expect your advisor to sketch out your future.

The smart, polite thing is to do your homework before the meeting. Tell your advisor what classes you’re interested in and which majors you’re considering. If you’ve already chosen a major, find out all your requirements in advance. Read class descriptions in the course catalog. Know your work schedule so you can pick classes that work around your job. If you’re saying to yourself, “I have no idea which direction to go,” spend some time in the career center. Take a personality test or look into job shadowing. Then meet with your academic advisor and go crazy.

**Top 10 Rules for College Roommates**
Ashley Vallone recently spent a whole year as a resident advisor at St. Michael’s College in Burlington, Vermont and survived to talk about it. Here, she shares her best tips for drama-free living:

1. **Don’t borrow your roommate’s things without asking.** Yes, that includes the stuff in the refrigerator.

2. **Clean up after yourself.** This is your living environment.

3. **If you have an early class** but your roommate can sleep in for another three hours, don’t hit the snooze button five times. Use a small, soft light instead of the overhead. If possible, walk on tiptoe.
4. **Set up some kind of housework arrangement from the get-go.** Some roommates like to stake a claim (the kitchen, the bathroom, windows, and dusting) and tackle it once a week; others prefer to write up a chart and rotate duties. Figure out what plan works for you and stick to it.

5. **If you have a significant other,** don’t plan to have him or her sleep over all the time. If you want some privacy for a bit, ask your roommate in advance. Texting works well for this.

6. **Make a joint decision on when social hours end.** Expect to turn off the music and kick your visitors out by 11 PM on weeknights. And when you do have visitors, make sure that they’re polite to your roommate.

7. **Don’t be loud at crazy hours.** Don’t spray-paint anyone’s door at 5 AM. In fact, just don’t spray-paint anyone’s door.

8. **Don’t do anything that makes your roommate feel uncomfortable.** And if you’re using drugs or alcohol in the dorm, there can be pretty harsh discipline for that.

9. **Carry your own room key.** If you find yourself locked out and it’s late, don’t wake up your roommate; instead, ask the resident advisor on duty to let you in.

10. **Don’t gossip about your roommate on campus.** You get to know someone pretty quickly when you’re sharing 300 square feet, and it’s not polite to share his or her secrets. If you have a serious dispute, see your resident advisor. But if you really just need to kvetch a little, call your parents or your old high-school friends. They’ll probably be happy to listen.

**Insider Tactics || How Top Students Exercise Good Etiquette**

**The Good Girl Marty Flothmann**

Freshman at the University of Miami

“I was home-schooled until college, and my parents never let me get away with anything, so I’m very careful to stay on my best behavior. I always turn my phone off and I never take a laptop to class: I tried that once and it was very hard not to switch from art history slides to Facebook. I don’t want to be tempted. The worst thing I’ll do in class is doodle—but I’m still listening!”
• **Give constructive criticism in peer reviews.** “In my philosophy class, we trade papers and have to grade each other’s work and make suggestions. I try to keep my comments neutral, and always grade the foreign students more generously. But there’s one girl in our class who really bashes people’s work. Now, everyone swaps papers before she has a chance to ask.”

• **Don’t play hooky.** “I cut class once and it was fun. But then, of course, the material I missed that day ended up on our midterm. I’ve found that borrowing someone’s notes isn’t the same as being there, so I try not to miss class ever. One of my instructors even has a rule that after one absence, you lose half a letter grade for each absence thereafter. It’s right in the syllabus.”

• **When you write to your professor, always include your section and course number.** “Professors teach multiple classes. If I just say, ‘Hi, it’s Marty,’ they’ll have no idea who I am.”

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**The Peacenik Madeline Mesa**

Communications major at Northwestern Michigan College

“I find that if you respect a professor, the professor will respect you back. Plus, it makes the whole experience more enjoyable for everyone.”

• **Get comfortable—just not too comfortable.** “I usually wear a t-shirt, jeans, and a jacket to class. If I see anyone in pajama bottoms, I’m like, ‘Why?’ There was one guy who walked around all year in a bathrobe.”

• **With roommates, communication is key.** “It’s normal to get annoyed at each other once in a while. The key is to talk before the tension builds up. Also, always ask permission before you borrow something. My roommate and I share books and movies, and even toiletries sometimes. And when I say, ‘I’ll replace it tomorrow,’ I really do mean it.”

• **If you have trouble understanding something, ask for help.** “Last year, my math instructor would meet with students after class to give extra help and that was great. But it depends on the teacher. Sometimes I’ll just ask a friend who’s in my class for help and we’ll do a few problems together. It actually makes a big difference.”
First impressions mean a lot in college. You figure out who the nice, cool people are pretty fast.”

- **Bring your A-game to group projects.** “There’s always one kid who doesn’t do his share, who doesn’t even try. In most cases, we’ll cover for him. But if it happens more than once, we’ll throw him under the bus and tell the professor. People who do the work should be the ones who get the credit.”

- **Bring your academic advisor a solid plan,** or at least a few ideas about the courses you’d like to take. “If you go in clueless, you could end up taking classes you don’t need.”

- **Answer questions in class. Just not too many.** “If you have your hand up the whole time and don’t give other students a chance to speak, people will laugh at you behind your back. Also, you’ll have no friends. It’s a balance.”

**Bibliography**


